

Mary Corse: A Survey in Light

For more than five decades, Mary Corse (b. 1945) has pursued a central question in her work: How can a painting embody light? She has approached this challenge differently from other artists who have sought to translate light's ephemeral glow into material form and color. Rather than depicting the effects of light via paint, Corse captures light directly, engaging its unique properties—the way it travels in waves and can be reflected and refracted—to create paintings that appear to move, shift, and radiate from within. This exhibition, the artist's first museum survey, presents an introduction to Corse's work and highlights key moments across her career. It begins in 1964, when Corse moved from Berkeley to Los Angeles to attend Chouinard Art Institute (which later became the California Institute of the Arts, known as CalArts). There she began an extraordinary period of technical experimentation that yielded bold, shaped monochrome canvases and three-dimensional constructions employing industrial materials such as metal, Plexiglas, and electric light to achieve luminosity. Her discovery in 1968 of glass microspheres—the tiny beads used in highway signs and lane lines to refract the light from cars—opened the door to the White Light paintings, Corse's breakthrough series whose concerns she continues to investigate today. Corse's ongoing interest in perception and light as both subject and material of her art has aligned her with others loosely grouped under the label of California Light and Space. Yet while most of the artists associated with that movement—including Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Helen Pashgian, and James Turrell—explore light's qualities by making sculptures or experiential installations, Corse works consistently to bring the physical and metaphysical qualities of light into the field of painting. Movement and time are critical components of Corse's work. Through the shifting position of our bodies in relation to the paintings, we become active participants in the creation of our perceptual experiences of them. At once minimal and maximal, material and immaterial, Corse's paintings resist immediate apprehension and invite us to take part in the act of discovery.

Beginnings

Following an intensive education in abstract painting as a teenager in Berkeley, Corse moved to Los Angeles in 1964 to begin her studies at the Chouinard Art Institute. At the time, the art school was host to a new generation of artists moving beyond painting into sculpture, performance, and conceptual practices. Corse left her brushy, gestural style behind in favor of a rigorous, stripped-down approach to painting that examined its fundamental elements: shape, scale, dimensionality, space, and light. The early works displayed in this section capture the range of Corse's

experimentation between 1964 and 1966, as her studio became a laboratory for formal and material investigation. She began to work almost exclusively in white, in progressively simpler geometric shapes—octagons, hexagons, diamonds, and then squares—that at times came off the wall and took on three dimensional forms. She worked independently and inventively, making screenprints on the floor, cutting her own Plexiglas and plywood, and sanding her painted surfaces to remove any signs of brushwork. Corse's foundational explorations from this time set in motion much of what was to come in the subsequent years.

Painting with Light

In 1966 Corse engineered her first electric light boxes. These "light paintings," as she has described them, prompted a brief but transformative shift away from the canvas as she replaced painted white fields with radiant fluorescent light. Over the next two years Corse developed a series of argon light boxes that could be suspended from the ceiling and powered wirelessly with Tesla coils, high-frequency generators that can transmit an electromagnetic field through a wall. Corse began taking physics classes—she needed to pass a proficiency test to procure certain capacitors and wires—which upended her worldview. She interpreted the ideas of quantum physics in relation to her own artistic concerns, recognizing that perception is always subjective and that uncertainty is at play in all systems. When driving through Malibu one evening, Corse made a serendipitous discovery: she noticed that when light struck the painted highway lines in front of her, they illuminated for an instant as she drove past. Realizing that the same glass microspheres embedded in road paint could be used to transform her white paintings into light-responsive works, Corse began covering the surfaces of her works with these tiny refractive beads. In the resulting White Light series, begun in 1968, Corse embraced the potential for her paintings to exist in ever-changing states, to appear alternately flat and full of brushwork, depending on the positions of the viewer.

New Forms in White Light

Since the 1970s Corse has pushed the formal and perceptual possibilities of her White Light paintings to ever more complex ends. Her compositions possess a structural logic, but she develops them intuitively, inspired by quick sketches rather than geometric formulas. She has worked in increasingly larger formats, integrated new motifs such as arches and bands, and incorporated black and occasionally color alongside her glowing white fields. Corse's most elusive White Light paintings are her Inner Band series, begun in 1996. These works are defined by an interior band (or multiple bands) that mysteriously shifts in and out of view as we walk alongside them.

They have no ideal vantage point and cannot be fixed to a single image, underscoring the subjectivity of perception and acknowledging that everyone experiences visual phenomena differently. With their inconstant surfaces and immersive scale, the Inner Band paintings encourage an active viewing experience that directly engages us as participants.